



The Top Ten Errors of Martial Artists Defending Against a Blade

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Abstract

There are ten deadly errors which make most empty-handed martial arts techniques against a knife ineffective. The principal error stems from the fact that few present-day martial systems teach the blade. The premise of this article is that to effectively defend against a knife, you need to know how to use one. The purpose of this article is to motivate martial arts instructors to analyze more critically their unarmed knife defense techniques based on a clear understanding of the use of the knife, and to reawaken interest in the blade arts in the martial arts community.

Introduction

Modern martial arts, and present-day versions of traditional martial systems, generally are designed for individual self-defense by a civilian against one or more unarmed adversaries. In some cases, techniques from these arts are also adapted for military or law enforcement use against single or multiple armed or unarmed adversaries. While advanced training in such arts often includes a limited number of techniques for an unarmed person to disarm a knife-wielding foe, it is the contention of the authors of this article that most of these techniques are unrealistic, and ineffective outside of the training hall.¹ While they might possibly work against a novice with a blade, they are unlikely to prove effective against a skilled and experienced knife-fighter. This is not to say that some of the techniques could not be redesigned to be effective, but rather, to caution that each of these techniques should be critically evaluated by martial arts instructors to ensure that students are not being given a false sense of security with regard to their ability to defend against a blade.

All photographs courtesy of Dean Canabal.

This article outlines ten basic errors which need to be considered when re-evaluating most knife-defense techniques taught in contemporary martial arts training:

1. Not knowing how to fight with a blade
2. Improper mind-set and lack of blade awareness
3. Incorrect structure
4. Blocking
5. Kicking
6. Permitting gaps
7. Using techniques designed for unarmed adversaries
8. Ignoring the adversary's checking hand
9. Failing to follow-up
10. Unrealistic training

These errors can be considered as the "top ten errors" of martial artists defending against a blade. They can each result in potentially fatal consequences if not corrected. The objective of this article is to make the martial arts community aware of the vulnerability of many of the knife-defense techniques taught presently and to encourage martial arts instructors to critically evaluate and properly redesign them.

This article draws upon insights derived from the theory and practice of three modern blade-based arts developed by John McCurry: Balika Jujitsu, McCurry's Combative Blade System (MCBS), and McCurry's American Silat System (MASS). These three arts fit together to form one modern integrated martial system based on the use of the blade whose techniques may also be utilized with impact weapons and empty-handed. Based upon 30 different knife-fighting systems from around the world, and various striking, joint-locking and throwing techniques from diverse martial arts, this system consists of 50 progressive phases, or levels. Progressing from simple and basic to complex and advanced, each successive level exposes and exploits the limitations of the immediately preceding levels to defeat

an adversary whose art is limited to the principles and techniques of those levels. The principal role played by the blade in this system derives from the recognition that the most formidable weapon you may face on the street, other than a gun, is a knife, and from the premise that the most effective means to defend against a knife (other than carrying a gun) is to carry a knife yourself and know how to use it.²

In this respect, although Balika, MASS, and MCBS are modern martial arts, they also represent a return to the traditions of classical jujitsu systems which were not exclusively empty-handed arts. Rather, they were armed battlefield arts that utilized a variety of weapons against armed and armored opponents, but also included



John McCurry, founder of three blade-based combat systems, demonstrates the use of machete and knife.

in their repertoire empty-handed techniques to use if a warrior's weapons were lost or damaged in battle or he found himself in a situation where carrying or using a weapon was prohibited.³

Top Ten Errors

1. Not Knowing How to Fight with a Blade

Sun Zi's famous dictum, "know the enemy and know yourself," is well-known in the martial arts world and is as readily applicable to situations of individual combat as it is to battlefield engagements by large numbers of warriors. However, few if any of the martial arts which include knife defense in their curriculum also teach their students how to fight with a knife (LaFonda, 2001: xvii). The obvious question which should, but seldom does, arise for practitioners and instructors of these arts is: "How can one know how to defend against a knife without knowing how to fight with one?"⁴ Not knowing how to use a knife can leave one unable to anticipate or properly react to what a knife-fighter can and will do on the street. Nor can knife-defense techniques be practiced in a realistic manner if a training partner can't provide a realistic attack because of lack of knowledge on how to fight with a blade.

While unarmed defense against a knife is not impossible, it is very difficult and very dangerous. The odds of being cut are extremely high. It requires a high level of skill, self-confidence, proper training, and luck. One mistake in defending against a knife attack can prove fatal. No one with a whit of common sense would ever get into a knife fight if it were possible to avoid it, and taking on a knife-wielding adversary when one is unarmed is something that no one should attempt, regardless of training or skill, unless there is no other reasonable alternative (Janich, 1993: 98-99; MacYoung, 1990: 111).⁵

Nevertheless, the majority of knife attacks do occur against unarmed persons (Pentecost, 1988: 9; LaFond, 2001: 21). And whether or not one carries a knife, or lives in a jurisdiction where it is possible to obtain a permit to carry a gun, a situation may arise where unarmed techniques may be needed for defense against a knife. The odds of surviving such an encounter may be improved by learning how to use a knife and by identifying and redesigning techniques marred by the "top ten errors" which are the subject of this article.

There are ten basic aspects of fighting with a knife which must be understood in order to be properly prepared to defend against an adversary armed with a blade:

- 1-a) There are many different ways to hold a knife.
- 1-b) Knife attacks are often unexpected.
- 1-c) Knife attacks can come from any angle.
- 1-d) Knife-fighters fight with both hands.
- 1-e) There are many different ways to use a knife.
- 1-f) Knife-fighters fight at different ranges.
- 1-g) Knife-fighters will not readily give up their blades.
- 1-h) There are no rules in a knife fight.
- 1-i) There are different kinds of knife-fighters.
- 1-j) One mistake in a knife fight can be fatal.



Use of a jacket to protect checking hand in knife-in-rear-hand stance.



Blade upward fighting position.

1-a. There are Many Different Ways to Hold a Knife

A knife-fighter can hold the weapon in the forward or rear hand. There are various adherents of each approach. Holding the blade in the rear hand enables a knife-fighter to block, strike or grab with his empty forward hand, shield his throat and vital organs, and protect the knife in the rear hand from disarming techniques. Some advocates of this posture recommend wrapping the forward arm with a jacket (Ryan, 1999: 37-44; Applegate, 1993: 11-12; Pentecost 1988: 20-21; LaFond, 2001: 131-146).

Holding the blade in the forward hand puts it between the knife-fighter and the adversary and reduces the distance to the knife-fighter's target. Advocates of this stance say that it provides better protection than having the empty hand forward which, they say, is too vulnerable to the opponent's knife, even if protected with a jacket or other article of clothing wound around it. A knife with a serrated blade can cut through clothing (Styers, 1952: 40-43; Janich, 1993: 15-18; McLemore, 2003: 35-37).

Although most knife-disarming techniques taught in martial arts schools are practiced against an adversary attacking with a knife held in traditional hammer grip, blade facing downward, or in reverse grip with blade facing the object of attack, there are many other ways to hold a knife (MacYoung, 1990: 38-55; Janich, 1993: 9-13; Ryan, 1999: 52-54; Pentecost, 1988: 17-20). To name only two: the knife may be held with blade facing upward in hammer grip rather than toward the ground, or with blade facing the person holding it in reverse grip rather than facing the subject of attack.

A disarming technique in which the martial artist's hand contacts the back of the opponent's blade will not work if the opponent holds the knife in such a position that execution of the disarming technique will bring the martial artist's hand in contact with the sharp edge rather than the back of the knife's blade. Nor will such a technique work if the attacker is wielding a knife with a double-edged blade.

1-b. Knife Attacks are Often Unexpected

In the dojo, knife-disarming techniques are generally practiced in a situation where the martial artist not only knows that the adversary is armed with a knife, but the attack begins with the adversary holding the knife in plain view and telegraphing the attack. This is not necessarily how real knife attacks occur.⁶ On the street a knife-fighter may emerge from concealment with an unexpected attack (Janich, 1993: 95), draw a knife from concealment (Ryan, 1999: 140-143), or cut you with a razor blade concealed in the palm,

Basic Movements from a five-angle system and possible usage:



Angle 1,
diagonal forehand
slash to throat.



Angle 2,
diagonal back-hand
slash to throat.



Angle 3,
lateral forehand slash
to abdomen.



Angle 4,
lateral backhand slash
to abdomen.



Angle 5,
straight thrust to
abdomen.

held between the fingers, or even wedged into the heel of a shoe (LaFond, 2001: 67-73). Underestimating a situation to be a fist-fight can prove fatal if the opponent instead stabs or slashes unexpectedly with a knife that had been concealed.

A knife-fighter can sometimes conceal an open blade in the hand which holds the knife, or behind the checking hand or arm, or behind the back or leg. A knife-fighter may draw a knife from a sheath or pocket, or from a location clipped inside a belt or pants, or from inside a sleeve or in a boot. A skilled knife-fighter can flip open a tactical folding knife or *balisong* in an instant and cut with it in the same continuous motion (MacYoung, 1990: 43-53).

The only way to be prepared to deal with a sudden and unexpected attack with a blade is to always assume that the opponent is armed with one or more knives, and to ensure that any unarmed techniques you have trained can be applied safely and effectively against an opponent with a knife in each hand.

1-c. Knife Attacks Can Come from Any Angle

There are numerous different angling systems used in the wide variety of knife-fighting systems in the world. There are 5-angle systems, 8-angle systems, and 12-angle systems, to name only the most common ones (Janich, 1993: 27-29; McLemore, 2003: 94-104; Ryan, 1999: 56-59). It should be apparent that a knife attack can come from any of the angles within the 360 degrees which comprise a circle. Many martial arts try to teach one to anticipate and to defend against a thrusting or slashing attack through any of the possible angles of an imaginary sphere of which you are the center. However, few of them implement this concept in the actual techniques being taught. For example, some systems limit practice to defending against slashing or thrusting attacks from 90 or 45 degrees. Yet it should be obvious that a blade can be directed through the same line as an upper cut, from reverse or "backhand" positions, and from any of the intermediate angles between those attacks which are generally practiced.

1-d. Knife-Fighters Fight with Both Hands

It is a serious mistake to focus attention solely on the knife wielded by the adversary. This can make one even more vulnerable to the checking hand, which can strike, lock, throw, and foil disarming techniques, and also draw, or already be holding, another knife. Knife-fighters fight with both hands (Pentecost, 1988: 14-15). The martial artist facing a knife-fighter must understand this and be prepared to cope with the threat presented by each of the adversary's hands, even though one may be empty. An experienced knife-fighter will distract with the knife and use the checking hand to stun before delivering a lethal stab or slash with the knife (Pentecost, 1988: 7).

However, most martial arts techniques for disarming a knife-fighter focus solely on the knife in the opponent's attacking hand and include no response for the adversary who precedes or follows-up the knife attack by punching or grabbing with the checking hand. These techniques will not work if the knife-fighter strikes first with the empty hand to the defender's eyes, and then follows up with a stab or slash (Pentecost, 1988: 12).

In practicing to defend against an attacker armed with a knife, the best procedure is to assume that the attacker has at least two knives — one in each hand, or one with which the attack is initiated, and another concealed in a location from which it may instantly be deployed by the attacker's other hand. It is crucial that all disarming techniques be designed



Use of checking hand to deflect opponent's defensive movement while slashing with knife.



John McCurry (left) punches Justin Quaid in the face with his checking hand while cutting Quaid's wrist with knife in McCurry's other hand.



A skilled knife fighter can intersperse kicks with use of his blade. John McCurry (left) kicks the knee of Dean Canabal while slashing Canabal's lead arm with his knife.

Basic techniques with a knife
in each hand.



and executed in such a manner that the defender's body is always at a proper angle and distance relative to the attacker so that the defender is safe, not only from the knife in the adversary's attacking hand, but also from the attacker's checking hand.

The double-*sinawali* two-person drill from the Filipino martial arts is helpful in training martial artists to use their checking hand, and to be constantly aware of the opponent's checking hand. In the empty-handed version of this drill, each pair of students begins with each student facing the other with the right hand cocked back, palm facing the opponent, as if preparing to attack with a chop, and the left arm is bent across the front of the body with the left hand palm down under the right hand. The drill is initiated by both students simultaneously striking toward each other's face with the right hand and slapping each other's right palms. They then simultaneously execute a downward strike toward each other's abdomen and slap each other's left palms. At the same time they execute the downward strike with their left hands, they each draw back the right hand to protect the face. The students then simultaneously strike toward each other's face with a backhand strike with the right hand and slap each other's right palms. Each then cocks back the left hand and bends the right arm across the body, right hand palm down under the left hand. The drill then resumes in mirror image of the movements previously executed. This drill can be performed stationary or moving back and forth, right or left, or in a circle clockwise or counterclockwise.

If the drill is performed with a knife in one hand, each opponent strikes the other's blade with his knife and slaps the other's palm with his

Double-*sinawali* (weaving) two-person drill with knife in each hand.



open hand. This teaches each student how to insert the hand in between knife strikes and is preparation for striking the opponent with a fist or open hand as an integrated movement with knife attacks. This also teaches the students to expect, be aware of, and counter similar tactics from an opponent. The drill can also be performed with a knife or stick in each hand or a knife in one hand and a stick in the other.

1-e. There are Many Ways to Use a Knife

A skilled or experienced knife-fighter will not only thrust or slash with the blade, but may employ it in a wide variety of ways integrated with a multitude of fighting techniques, such as kicking, grappling, head-butting, joint-locking, striking, and hand or foot-trapping. The butt-end or pommel of the knife can be used to strike vital points. The unsharpened back or flat side of the blade can be used to strike or slap. The sharpened edge, back side, or flat side of the blade can be used as a lever for joint-locks or throws. And, a knife may be thrown (MacYoung, 1990: 105).

A knife may be used to block or parry strikes or kicks with devastating effect. Knife-edge blocking techniques can cut a martial artist's wrist or the brachial artery in the upper arm. After blocking, the knife blade can be dragged along the opponent's arm in a motion similar to scaling a fish, scraping the flesh from the bone. Knife-edge blocking techniques against kicks can cause severe pain to the shin or rapid death by severing the femoral artery in the inside of the thigh (MacYoung, 1990: 105; Janich, 1993: 81-88).

The knife-fighter can also use the butt-end or pommel of the knife to block strikes or kicks while, at the same time, delivering painful or disabling strikes to various points on the limb, a technique referred to as *gunting* in the Filipino martial arts. Such *gunting* strikes can also be delivered with the knife-fighter's open or closed checking hand.

"Defanging the snake" is a basic knife-fighting technique by which a knife-fighter defends against an attack from a knife-wielding adversary by cutting the attacking hand or wrist, causing the attacker to drop the knife. A knife-fighter can use the same technique to cut a martial artist's hand in response to a punch or other open-handed strike, causing severe pain and bleeding, as well as severing fingers or the radial artery.

A martial artist defending against a knife should expect and be prepared to respond to any and all such non-conventional uses to which an adversary may put a blade, but few if any *non-blade* martial systems teach awareness and counters for such techniques.

1-f. Knife-fighters Fight at Different Ranges

Experienced knife-fighters fight at all three ranges — long range (opponent's forward hand can be cut, but not the head or body without taking a step forward), middle range (either combatant can cut each other's body), and close range (i.e., stand-up or on-the-ground grappling range). Experienced knife-fighters are skilled at moving from one range to another. An unarmed martial artist facing a knife-fighter must be able to fight at all ranges and move freely from one to another. The martial artist must understand which techniques work and which ones don't work at each range when the opponent has a blade. For example, one-handed parrying or passing works at long range, but not at middle or close range because the adversary is too close. One must also know how to follow-up with the checking hand in order to be safe from the opponent's blade.



Striking opponent's temple with pommel of knife.



Gunting strike with knife pommel to bicep of opponent's punching arm and to shin of opponent's kicking leg.



John McCurry (right) demonstrates "defanging the snake" defense against slashing attack by Joe Salem.

Four different knife-fighting ranges:
 1) long 2) middle 3) close, and
 4) ground grappling-range.



1-g. Knife-fighters Will Not Readily Give Up Their Blades

Knife-fighters are trained to retain their weapons and will not readily yield-up their blade regardless of what joint-locking or throwing techniques are employed against them. It is an instinctive reaction for a knife-fighter to hang onto his knife. Disarming techniques based upon joint-locking or throwing are unlikely to be effective against an experienced knife-fighter unless they are preceded and/or accompanied by a strike to a vital point which produces sufficient pain to distract and weaken the knife-fighter or otherwise cause him to loosen his grip. Struggling to disarm the knife-fighter can result in being cut numerous times, and one of those cuts could prove fatal.

1-h. There are No Rules in a Knife Fight

It should go without saying that there are no rules in a knife fight. Always expect the unexpected, and be extremely attentive to the environment — up, down, left, right, 360 degrees, both immediate and long-range. Identify escape routes as well as objects that could be grabbed and used by either party for weapons.⁷ Be particularly attentive to other persons or animals that could come to the assistance of the opponent (or yourself) as obstacles. In a bar or restaurant, even a salt or pepper shaker could be used to temporarily blind your opponent. Outside, sand or dirt can be thrown with similar effect. House keys can sometimes be used as a weapon. A scissors or pen can be used to thrust or slash. Even if the opponent gets disarmed, they might still counterattack with any object that comes readily to hand.

1-i. There are Different Kinds of Knife-fighters

There are many different kinds of knife-fighters and a variety of ways to categorize them. Diaz-Cobo focuses on different levels of skill and experience to distinguish among three categories of knife-fighters: (1) unskilled, (2) skilled, and (3) masters (Diaz-Cobo 1982: 3-4).

Ryan differentiates among five different kinds of knife-fighters based upon what he terms “certain aggressive patterns [that] emerge and dominate our performances” when under stress: (1) chargers (who rush you), (2) blockers (who stand their ground and wait for you to make the first move), (3) runners (who often “fence” with a knife), (4) sluggers (who attack with full force), and (5) synergists (who shift from one pattern to another) (Ryan 1999: 122-130).

LaFond relies on his investigation and analysis of over 250 incidents of violence involving the use of edged weapons in his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland, to identify three kinds of blade-armed aggressors: (1) trained knifers (only 1% of those involved in the bladed encounters LaFond investigated), (2) prison knifers (who learn to use “shanks” while incarcerated, but when encountered on the street generally carry guns), and (3) advantage knifers (who rely on a blade to gain a tactical advantage) (LaFond, 2001: 47-60). There are three types of advantage knifers: (1) “twerps” who need a knife to compensate for their diminutive stature or inferior fighting ability and attack unexpectedly, drawing their blade from concealment, (2) “goons and psychos” who may be encountered in seedy bars or other similar locales, and (3) battered women beaten-up one time too many by their brutal boyfriends or husbands.

Women as well as men may be potential knife-wielding attackers as well as martial artists attempting to defend themselves against a blade. In 1,000 acts of violence analyzed by LaFond, female aggressors were armed as

often as male aggressors and 45% of female attacks on males were successful (LaFond, 2001: 30-32, 56-57).

1-j. One Mistake in a Knife Fight Can Be Fatal

Knives are formidable weapons. No matter how strong you may be or how many punches or kicks you can take, one cut with a piece of razor-sharp steel to a major artery or internal organ can be fatal.⁸

As in stage magic, "the hand is quicker than the eye." Realistic and effective techniques of defense against a blade must be trained until they are so imbedded in your muscle memory that you can react instinctively and instantaneously to any attack from any angle at any moment in order to have any chance of surviving a knife-fight, particularly if you are unarmed.

Unrealistic training that develops incorrect muscle memory and a false sense of confidence can be more dangerous than no training at all. Someone without training knows there may be no chance of surviving an encounter with an adversary armed with a knife and, if not paralyzed by fear, will make the correct decision and avoid such a confrontation by any means necessary, running as fast as possible for the closest escape route. A martial artist who thinks he can defend against a knife-fighter on the street because he can successfully defend against a fellow martial artist pretending to attack him in the dojo with a practice weapon may be led by false self-confidence to "find out if this stuff really works" and then discover, too late, that it doesn't. Even a highly skilled and experienced knife-fighter, armed with a knife, avoids a knife fight unless there is no alternative but to stand and fight. It is common wisdom among knife-fighters that, "The best knife fight is the one you did not get into."

2. Improper Mind-set and Lack of Blade Awareness

The second "deadly error" of martial artists facing a blade is improper mind-set. When confronting an adversary armed with a knife, proper mind-set is of crucial importance. Proper mind-set in this context implies both a healthy respect for what the adversary's blade can do and a realistic appreciation of the inherent limitations on unarmed self-defense against a blade.

Many martial art instructors insist that when facing a knife, one must accept the inevitability of getting cut. Others tout their particular tactics as "cut and don't get cut." But the reality is more complex than either of these approaches suggest. It is difficult not to be unnerved at the sight of a real incoming knife attack. Although one could possibly incur a cut in the course of a knife-fight and survive, every effort must be made not to allow a knife-wielding adversary to cut a vital organ or area of the body.

While it is difficult to be in a knife fight and not get cut, what is important is to avoid being cut fatally. There is an adage in medieval Japanese swordsmanship, "Let the opponent cut your flesh so you can cut his bone." Blade awareness not only means knowing where the opponent's blade is, how it can move, and what it can do, but also being sensitive to your own body position relative to the opponent's blade.

It is as important to control where the opponent can cut as it is to endeavor to avoid being cut. At the most basic level this means using the checking hand to protect the neck area and, if necessary, to allow the hand to be cut instead. It also means altering the traditional manner of holding the hands in various on-guard positions used in the martial arts. Traditional



Use of checking hand to protect throat.



The correct way to face a knife-wielding foe: wrists turned toward you, with back of hands facing opponent's blade.



William Lawrence III (left) demonstrates the wrong way to face knife-wielding John McCurry: wrists exposed to opponent's blade.



Use of the checking hand to support the knife-wielding arm at wrist (1A) and at the forearm, below the elbow (1B)

2A) Outward block defense against backhand knife attack. 2B) Pressing defender's blocking arm above elbow inward and down exposes his neck to immediate cut with knife



on-guard positions expose the inside of one's wrists to the opponent's knife, which is a potentially fatal mistake. In facing an adversary armed with a knife, always keep the backs of the hands facing the opponent to protect the inside of the wrists from being cut.

3. Incorrect Structure

Most martial arts teach deep stances, like the horse stance or the *zenkutsu-dachi* stance, which provide a solid base for punching but have the disadvantage of limiting mobility. In a knife fight mobility is essential. Particularly when you are unarmed and facing an adversary who has a blade, mobility is of critical importance to avoid being cut and to be able to disarm the adversary. Classical deep stances should be avoided in favor of a more natural stance which facilitates rapid movement.

It is crucial to have correct body structure during a knife fight in order to maintain stability and equilibrium and to prevent the opponent from getting you off-balance and vulnerable. This means correct lower body structure to maintain a strong, but mobile stance, and correct upper body structure to maintain an adequate guard and give necessary strength to blocking, striking, locking and throwing techniques.

There are two important principles which underlie correct structure which are remarkably simple, but generally unknown or kept secret in the martial arts. The "secret" to correct lower body structure is in a technique known as the *kuda* step. This involves incorporating into all stepping movements a slight jump or hop into the air by the front foot and then the back foot when moving forward, and a similar motion by the back foot and then the front foot when moving back. This causes each foot to land forcefully on the ground with a stomping movement which aligns the lower body in proper structure and makes it exceedingly difficult for an opponent to dislodge or upset your balance. Experiment with a favorite martial arts stance by having a practice partner push you from different angles, and then do a *kuda* step when going into or moving forward or backward from your stance. The *kuda* step can make a dramatic difference in stability during repositioning of the body.

The "secret" to correct upper body structure is the "touch" principle. If both arms touch when punching or striking there is more stable structure and a dramatic increase in strength. When punching, the checking hand should lightly touch the inner forearm of the punching hand, slightly below the elbow, fingers up. This is sometimes referred to as a "supported punch." Not only does this punch carry more strength, it is more difficult to block and more effective in breaking through an opponent's guard than an unsupported punch. The same is true with blocking. A supported block is much more effective in stopping or redirecting a strike. Compare the effectiveness of a normal punch or block with a supported one to see the difference. The touch principle can also be utilized by slapping the shoulder of the striking or blocking arm with the checking hand immediately before you punch or block. This will infuse additional strength into the strike or block and the opponent cannot collapse your punch or block to break through or take you off balance.

A highly experienced knife-fighter will use a supporting hand to reinforce his cutting, stabbing or slashing movements. Supporting your defensive movements by making similar use of the touch principle will

make them more effective in countering such techniques and defense against attacks and successful use of attacking movements can neutralize the opponent's ability to harm you.

4. Blocking

Most martial arts teach blocking techniques as the basic means to protect oneself from punching or kicking attacks. Martial arts practitioners may attempt to employ such blocks against a knife-fighter. However, a skilled knife-fighter can easily respond to blocks by cutting his opponent with a variety of techniques. The five basic responses of a knife-fighter to a block are: pressing, pulling, passing, cutting the line, and going around the line.

4-a. Pressing

A block executed with restrained energy by the defender can be countered by the attacker's pressing the defender's blocking arm, above the elbow, back toward the defender's body, freeing the attacker's knife-wielding hand to continue its attacking movement to cut the defender.

4-b. Pulling

A block of a knife attack executed by a defender with forward energy directed against the attacker can readily be countered by the attacker grabbing the defender's blocking hand and pulling it forward, thus leaving the attacker's knife-wielding hand free to continue its attacking movement to cut the defender.

4-c. Passing

Another counter to a block is for the attacker to slap the defender's blocking hand in the same direction as the defender's blocking energy is directed, freeing the attacker's knife-wielding hand to continue its attacking motion to cut the defender.

4-d. Cutting the Line

An immediate counter to a block is for the attacker to slide the blocked arm in a downward motion across the defender's blocking arm and continue that movement with the blade of the knife, cutting the defender's arm. This can be followed up with an immediate slash or thrust to a vital area.

4-e. Going Around the Line

The attacker can disengage his knife-wielding arm from the defender's block and go around the block to slash and/or stab at the opening the block creates. A high attack which draws a high block can be followed by a low attack at the low opening created by the high block and vice-versa.

Static blocking against a skilled knife-fighter, rather than giving the defender a chance to counterattack with a punch or kick, will give the knife-fighter an opportunity to counterattack with a slash or thrust. This is not to say that blocks can never be employed successfully against a blade, not everyone who may attack you with a knife will necessarily be skilled or experienced in its use. But parries which intercept, redirect and control the adversary's knife-wielding hand, and are accompanied by moving one's body into a position relative to the adversary which protects you from his



Four possible responses to C) an outward block defense against forehand knife attack

C-1) Pulling defender's blocking arm forward exposes his neck to immediate cut with knife

C-2) Slapping defender's blocking arm in same direction as the flow of his blocking energy clears the way for attacker's knife to cut his neck

C-3) Attacker can easily counter block by sliding blocked arm in a downward motion across defender's blocking arm and cutting across the arm with his knife

C-4) Attacker disengages knife-wielding arm from defender's block and cuts around blocking arm to defender's abdomen.



blade, are safer and more effective. Such methods are to be preferred to blocking techniques, which use force against force.

5. Kicking

The ability to throw high kicks is considered a mark of the advanced student in many martial arts, but the use of such kicks is highly impractical on the street, particularly when facing an adversary armed with a knife. It is too easy to avoid such a kick and employing one makes you vulnerable to being blocked with your adversary's blade and receiving a fatal cut to the femoral artery inside the thigh.

Low kicks may be effectively employed against a knife-fighter provided they are limited to the adversary's instep, ankle, shin, knee or groin. The only time to kick a blade-armed adversary in the head is if and when you throw him to the ground.

6. Permitting Gaps Between You and the Attacker

It is essential to maintain a safe distance, so the adversary cannot cut you without taking a step forward. Then, as the attack is initiated, you should enter to intercept and control the attack. It is then necessary to prevent any gap from developing which could increase your vulnerability to a cut. Enter deeply to use the opponent's body as a shield. Allowing any gaps creates openings for the adversary to initiate another attack when you are now within striking distance.

7. Using Techniques Designed for Unarmed Adversaries

There are certain techniques which may be employed against an unarmed adversary on the supposition that you should be able, when necessary, to take a punch or a kick, but it would be dangerous to use them against a knife-fighter. This needs to be kept in mind particularly with regard to techniques that involve moving to the inside rather than to the outside of the opponent's guard.

All techniques should be evaluated critically with regard to whether they render you vulnerable to being cut by a blade held in either hand of your opponent. For example, certain throwing techniques permit your opponent to grab onto your uniform or belt to assist him in taking his fall in the dojo. The problem with using such techniques against a knife-fighter is that the same hand that can grab your uniform or belt can just as readily stab you with a knife. Techniques which leave vulnerabilities to such counter-strokes should be redesigned to take into account a blade in your opponent's hand.

8. Ignoring the Adversary's Checking Hand

You should always assume your adversary has a knife in each hand. That will prevent you from focusing solely on the knife in the attacking hand and remind you to maintain a position of safety from the opponent's checking hand as well. This can also protect you from being cut by an opponent

erroneously believed to be unarmed.

Unrealistic practice in the dojo where the attacker leaves his checking hand hanging limp at his side fosters carelessness on the part of the defender and results in an improper attitude toward the potential danger posed by the attacker's checking hand. An experienced knife-fighter will hit and stun you with his checking hand before he cuts or stabs you (Pentecost, 1988: 7).

Martial arts students should be instructed to keep their checking hand in a guard position when attacking and, if the defender comes within range of the checking hand at any point in the practice of a technique, to strike the defender with it to make the defender aware of his unsafe positioning. During dojo practice of knife-disarming techniques it is recommended that the attacker have a training knife in each hand to impress upon the defender the need to be cognizant at all times of the adversary's checking hand as well as the primary attacking hand.



Thrusting fingers into opponent's eyes with checking hand while cutting his wrist with knife in other hand

9. Failing to Follow-up

A confrontation with an adversary armed with a blade is mortal combat. A properly administered strike to a vital area of the opponent may not be sufficient to end the engagement to the point where one is safe from being fatally cut. Even if the adversary is disarmed successfully, he could still move to recover the weapon or draw another from concealment.

It is necessary not only to control and disarm the adversary, but to continue to control him thereafter. This means following through decisively with appropriate techniques until the adversary is rendered incapable of posing any further risk. The specifics of how that is to be accomplished will depend upon your particular martial art and the legal and ethical considerations appropriate to the situation.

The need to follow-up after disarming an opponent illustrates, once again, the need to know how to fight with a knife in order to know how to defend against one. Having once taken an opponent's knife away, it would be nice to know how to use it against the opponent should he draw another knife from concealment and attack again. It would be the height of foolishness, after "beating the odds" by surviving one unarmed encounter with a knife-wielding opponent, to "push your luck" by tossing aside the knife you just captured and trying another unarmed technique against a re-armed opponent instead of leveling the playing field by confronting him with his own knife.⁹

10. Unrealistic Training

It is generally accepted in the martial arts that the way you train in the dojo is the way you will react on the street in a real fight. Situations of real combat do not leave time for reflection. You must react immediately to whatever threat presents itself and must rely on your training to get you safely and successfully through the encounter. Realistic training which develops correct muscle memory is essential.

However, most dojo training does not properly prepare the martial artist for real encounters on the street, particularly with an adversary armed with a knife. The problem is not so much that dojo training is formalized



John McCurry (left) demonstrates a deadly counter to an outward block and figure-4 defense by Pat Salantri.

or ritualized, but that it often presents the student with unrealistic attacks and/or responses. Generally, the knife attacks against which martial artists are trained to defend are single large movements, telegraphed from the beginning, which are completed in a locked-out manner with the attacker conveniently vulnerable to a takedown, throw, or striking or kicking technique. This awkward and robot-like method of attack has no resemblance to how a real knife-fighter will attack on the street. As a result, martial artists are generally unprepared for a real knife attack which will not be telegraphed, will often come unexpectedly and from concealment, be delivered with lightning speed, and relentlessly followed-up with multiple secondary attacks (Pentecost, 1988: 7, 13).

Disarming techniques are often practiced in an unrealistic and ritualized manner which teaches incorrect muscle memory and bad habits — like returning the knife to your opponent after taking it away. Disarming techniques based on joint locks or throws are generally ineffective against an experienced knife-fighter unless preceded and accompanied by striking techniques against vital areas or appropriate acupuncture points to distract, stun and/or break the balance of the adversary. Disarming techniques that expose the martial artist to being cut by a weapon concealed in or drawn by the opponent's checking hand are unrealistic and dangerous and should be redesigned or discarded.

Knife-defense training must be realistic if it is to be effective. Appropriate training equipment should be used to insure the safety of participants while exposing them to scenarios that are likely to be encountered on the street (Ryan, 1999: 144-151). Realistic practice of knife defense techniques should, when the student reaches an advanced level, involve defense against a live blade. A student who only trains against a practice weapon is in danger of freezing or panicking when confronted with a real knife regardless of how adept defense may be against a rubber or wooden one. However, for safety reasons, any "live blade" training for civilians should be conducted with suitable protective equipment and/or in slow motion. There is too much that can go wrong in a knife fight to risk fatal injury from overly-realistic practice.

Conclusion

While present-day martial artists train for a variety of reasons, including exercise, stress reduction, self-perfection, and spiritual development, learning an effective means of self-defense remains a principal concern for many. Other than a gun, a knife is the most formidable weapon you will face in a real life-or-death encounter on today's streets. The most effective defense against a knife, other than a gun, is another knife in the hands of someone who knows how to use it. To be able to defend yourself unarmed against someone with a blade, you have to know how to use a blade. Sun Zi wrote: "Know your enemy and know yourself and in a hundred battles you will never be defeated."

Yet many martial arts taught today limit themselves to teaching unarmed techniques, or the use of ancient weapons which cannot practically be carried on an everyday basis in modern society, and do not integrate the use of a knife into their training. This not only represents a departure from the ancient systems of battlefield arts which integrated the use of weapons with unarmed techniques and grappling, but also limits the ability of

contemporary martial arts instructors to teach realistic and effective knife-disarming techniques to their students. It is hoped that this article will motivate martial arts practitioners to critically assess the practical utility of their knife-disarming techniques and reawaken interest in the study of the blade arts, both for their own intrinsic value and as a means of improving knife-disarming techniques presently practiced.



Notes

- ¹ While it is expected that many martial artists may disagree with this statement, there is general agreement on its accuracy in the contemporary knife-fighting literature. See, e.g., LaFond (2001: 19); Pentecost (1988: 11-12); Janich (1993: 98); Diaz-Cobo (1982: vii).
- ² See Mol (2001: 55): "[J]ujutsu should not be defined as a weaponless art. On the contrary, the transmission scrolls of a number of jujutsu schools clearly indicate that a variety of minor weapons were used ... Conventional types of weapons that were often used were short swords and daggers, of various lengths and mounted with various types of fittings. In battlefield grappling, sturdy dirks were used to penetrate the weaker points of an opponent's armor." See also Pranin (1999: 27): "The modern idea that old jujutsu are weaponless arts similar to judo is not correct. The truth is there are many jujutsu arts which are fundamentally different ... Mostly these are true *koryu* [classical martial schools] and were conceived for battlefield combat against armor-clad soldiers ... Some of the more intricate systems included advanced techniques and weapons such as the *kusarigama* [chain-and-sickle], *tanto* [knife], or even *kodachi* [short sword]." Consider, as well, Angier's recounting of Yoshida Kenji's instruction in Yanagi-ryu Aiki Jujutsu: "He said that in the old days, weapons were more important, and that the hand arts were used when you didn't have a weapon or were in a castle or clan mansion where drawing a weapon was punishable by death unless you were a member of the household guard on duty ... Sensei insisted that the sword, spear, naginata, jo, and the hand arts were all the same. The sword was taught first, then the corresponding hand application" (Angier: 2000).
- ³ "[T]he greatest advantage of the edged weapon is that it need only touch you to cause damage ... The edged weapon requires very little speed and even less strength to do its job ... in the hands of a fast, strong athlete, the edged weapon can be immensely frightening ... it can come at you from any conceivable angle and still be effective" (Ryan, 1999: 18-19). "Tanto were used by samurai as an alternative weapon, but the knife is still on the belt of modern warriors as a companion to modern firearms. This is amazing when you think about it! The knife may be one of the all time greatest weapons due to its versatile nature. History seems to confirm this" (Pranin, et al. 1999: 27).
- ⁴ "The only martial arts that deal with knife attacks realistically are those that also emphasize the combative use of the knife, namely the Filipino martial arts and Indonesian *pencak-silat*" (Janich, 1993: 98). See Loriega (1999: 109-142) for unarmed defenses against a blade taught in Spain's traditional knife-fighting arts.
- ⁵ Cf. LaFond (2001: 206): "[T]he main point one should consider when deciding whether or not to run [is]: Can I get away? If so, how?" LaFond

makes a good point: "If the runner is caught, his attacker is very likely behind him and is in an aggressive state, while the runner is still caught in a flight mind-set" LaFond (2001: 211). Additionally, if the fleeing subject of an attack is run down and caught, she will likely be exhausted and demoralized and, accordingly, will not be in the best condition to defend herself. LaFond's advice is: "Trust your instincts on this one. If you are more confident in your ability [to] fight than in your ability to outrun an attacker, do not give him your back. Fight him. If you decide otherwise, you need to assess his pursuit options as well as your flight options" (LaFond, 2001: 212).

- ⁶ "Both traditional and eclectic [martial] artists tend to consider knife use from a similar reference point: the knifer's stance. However, a knifer's attack is usually facilitated by using a casual approach posture not by taking a stance and challenging his victim. The knifer most often approaches at a walk with the right hand held close to the right hip" (LaFond, 2001: 17).
- ⁷ The traditional knife-fighting arts of Spain include among their techniques the use of such "incidental weapons" as walking sticks, sword canes, riding crops, chairs, scissors, jackets, and capes to defend against a knife (Loriega, 1999: 109-127).
- ⁸ "The reality of knife combat is that you are killing people. Hollywood doesn't show what it's really about ... If you've closed with the guy, you have to hold him until he is either dead or too weak to strike back. They don't drop nice, neat, and clean like in the movies. They kick, twitch, and bleed ... That's the other guy. Unlike what happens in the movies, he may have gotten you, too. Look down at your sliced arm hanging useless at your side pouring blood. It's numb now but the pain will come soon. If you're lucky, he didn't slash any nerves because if he did, you've just lost the use of your arm for the rest of your life. If you're lucky, you only have to go to the hospital for surgery, then spend the next six months trying to relearn how to use your arm. If he got a body shot in, you're going to the hospital for about three weeks" (MacYoung, 1990: 110).
- ⁹ See Angier's recounting (2000) of his instruction in Yanagi-ryu Aiki Jujutsu by Yoshida Kenji: "To have a weapon and not use it was, in his opinion, stupid. He loved going to movies, and we went often. He was always amazed when the hero tossed away his gun and took on the villain with his bare hands."

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